

Barlaam and Josaphat

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An excellent book was published in 2014 which describes the lives of Barlaam and Josaphat.

In Search of the Christian Buddha: How an Asian Sage Became a Medieval Saint, By Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and Peggy McCracken, W.W. Norton & Company. 2014. (ISBN 9780392089158)

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/in-search-of-the-christian-buddha-donald-s-lopez/1116819120>

2014 13 May Lion's Roar, "Reviews: How the Buddha Became St. Josaphat: Reviews of *In Search of the Christian Buddha: How an Asian Sage Became a Medieval Saint* by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and Peggy McCracken".

<https://www.lionsroar.com/reviews-how-the-buddha-became-st-josaphat/>

Barlaam and Josaphat **by Jacquetta Gomes [Buddhist Group of Kendal (Theravada)]**

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The 2009 BBC series of *A History of Christianity*, presented by Oxford University Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, was accompanied by his book *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*.

He states: "a tale which went on to unite Christians everywhere in enjoyment of it for something like a millennium, ...is ... the story of Gautama Buddha, turned into a Christian novel about a hermit and a young Prince, Barlaam and Josaphat. Barlaam converts the prince to the true faith, but that true faith is no longer Buddha's revelation, but Christianity - while the Buddha has become a Christian hermit in the desert of Sinai, though his prince is still from a Royal House of India." (page 231)

"The two heroes became saints, with their own feast days, hymns and anthems." (page 232)

The review by Eamon Duffy of Diarmaid MacCulloch's *A History of Christianity*, explains:

"MacCulloch illustrates the creative transformations of Christian tradition with an account of an ancient life of Buddha..."

Wikisource 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica / Barlaam and Josaphat explains

"The heroes of this romance have even attained saintly rank. Their names were included by Petrus de Natalibus in his *Catalogus Sanctorum* (c. 1380), and Cardinal Baronius included them in his official *Martyrologium* authorized by Sixtus V. (1585-1590) under the date of 27th of November. In the Orthodox Eastern Church 'the holy Josaph [later Josaphat], son of Abener, king of India' is allotted the 26th of August. Thus unwittingly Gautama the Buddha has come to official recognition as a saint in two branches of the ...Church, and no one will say that he does not deserve the

honour. A church dedicated *Divo Josaphat* in Palermo is probably not the only one of its kind."

The Story of Barlaam and Josaphat

In The Gnostic Apostle Thomas: Chapter 21 Barlaam and Josaphat explains

"The Ethiopic version is found in one of the surviving texts. It opens with a reference to Thomas's mission in India, and so do Greek and Syriac texts. There follows the story of Josaphat, the son of an Indian ruler whose priests were alarmed by the spread of Christianity. When he was born, all the sages and astrologers predicted a splendid future for him, except one, who foretold that he would become a Christian. To prevent such an outcome, the king brought up his son in secluded palaces and protected him from all contacts with the world. But a Christian sage, Barlaam, disguised himself as a merchant and inveigled his way into the youth's presence. He taught the prince Christian doctrine and finally converted and baptized him. The king tried to win back his son by every means he could think of, including an offer of half of his kingdom. All the king's efforts failed. Josaphat abandoned his princely life and became an ascetic in the desert, joined there by his preceptor, Barlaam."

The Catholic Encyclopedia section "Barlaam and Josaphat" explains:

"Years after their death, the bodies were brought to India and their grave became renowned by miracles."

Parallels Between The Stories of the Life of the Buddha and Barlaam and Josaphat

Writing in *The Times*, Adam Ford (the then Chaplain of St Pauls Girls School, Hammersmith), explains

"Josaphat was the archetypal rich young man who gave up wealth and privilege and left everything in his search for truth. He was accompanied by the monk Barlaam. Josaphat was the Buddha in disguise. The name of Josaphat is a corruption of *Bodhisattva* - 'enlightenment being'. The original story is that of the young Prince Gautama who in the sixth century BC was born into a wealthy warrior family of north-east India. He lived a life of luxury until in early adulthood he was confronted by the sight of old age, disease and death. The impermanence of life led him to seek a deeper security. At 35 he experienced enlightenment and tasted *Nirvana* for the first time." ("The Welcome, Gentle Infiltrator", Adam Ford, *The Times*, Saturday 2 June 1984).

Wikisource 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica / Barlaam and Josaphat explains

"Some of the correspondences in the two stories are almost minute, and even the phraseology, in which some of the details of Josephat's history are described, almost literally renders the Sanskrit ... the very word, Joasaph or Josaphat (Arabic, *Yudasatf*) is a corruption of Bodhisat due to a confusion in the Arabic letters for Y and B, and Bodisattva is a common title for the Buddha in the many birth-stories..."

The Catholic Encyclopedia section "Barlaam and Josaphat" explains:

"The story is a Christianized version of one of the legends of Buddha, as even the name Josaphat would seem to show. This is said to be a corruption of the original Joasaph, which is again corrupted from the middle Persian Budasif (Budasif = Bodhisattva)..."

Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide. (General Editor Kevin Trainor) explains

“The ... name Josaphat derives from the Sanskrit *Bodhisattva*, a term used to refer to the Buddha prior to his enlightenment, and many of the details of Josaphat's life closely parallel episodes from the Buddha's youth, including his closeted early life within his father's palace before a transformative encounter with old age, sickness, death, and an ascetic renunciant.” (page 23)

The Middle Ages

The story of Barlaam and Josaphat became a very popular story in Europe in the Middle Ages. It appeared as “Barlaam and Josaphat”, in the thirteenth century *Golden Legend* or *Lives of the Saints* by the Archbishop of Genoa, Jacobus de Voragine (c.1229-1298). This is explained in “Golden Legend - Story of Barlaam and Josaphat” in the *Catholic Saints Info*.

Writing in *The Times*, Adam Ford explains

“The Buddha was unwittingly numbered amongst the saints by medieval Christendom though never officially canonised ... this remarkable transformation... the story of Buddha is hidden in the medieval legend of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat... To them was ascribed the second conversion in India to Christianity.”
 (“The Welcome, Gentle Infiltrator”, Adam Ford, *The Times*, Saturday 2 June 1984)

Post Medieval Understanding of the Origins of the Story

Wikisource 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica / Barlaam and Josaphat explains

“The identity of the stories of Buddha and St Josaphat was recognized by the historian of Portuguese India, Diogo do Couto (1542-1616)... In modern times the honour belongs to Laboulaye (1859), Felix Lebrecht in 1860, putting it beyond dispute. Subsequent researches have been carried out by Zotenberg, Max Muller, Rhys Davids, Braunshtolz and Joseph Jacobs, who published his *Barlaam and Josaphat* in 1896.”

Detailed information about the life of the Buddha became widely available in the West in the 19th century. European scholars were then able to learn about the origins of Josaphat and Barlaam's lives. Some were amazed by the fact that Buddha, as Josaphat, had become a Christian Saint.

In 1878 Professor T. W. [Thomas William] Rhys Davids (1843-1922), founder and first President of the PTS (Pali Text Society), wrote about Barlaam and Josephat. Writing in the Introduction of *Buddhist Birth-Stories: Jataka Tales* about the court of the 8th century Khalif of Baghdad he stated:

“A Christian high in office at his court, afterwards became a monk, and is well known under the name of St John of Damascus, as the author in Greek of many theological works in defence of the Orthodox faith. Among these is a religious romance called *Barlaam and Josaphat*, giving the history of an Indian prince who was converted by Barlaam and became a hermit. This history, the reader will be surprised to learn, is taken from the life of the Buddha; and Joasaph is merely the Buddha under another name, the word Joasaph or Josaphat being simply a corruption of the word Bodhisat, the title of the future Buddha so constantly repeated in the *Buddhist Birth Stories*. Now a life of the Buddha forms the introduction to our *Jataka Book*, and St John's romance also contains a number of fables and stories, most of which have been

traced back to the same source. This book, the first religious romance published in a Western language, became very popular indeed ... and was translated into many other European languages ... This will show how widely it was read and how much its moral tone pleased the taste of the Middle Ages."

(Introduction: The Barlaam and Josaphat Literature pages xxxiv-xxxv)

Some of the more learned of the numerous writers who translated or composed new works on the basis of the story of Josaphat, have pointed out in their notes that he had been canonized; and the hero of the romance is usually called St Josaphat in the title of these works... it was Professor Max Muller, who has done so much to infuse the glow of life into the dry bones of Oriental scholarship, who first pointed out the strange fact - almost incredible, were it not for the completeness of the proof - that Gotama the Buddha, under the name of St Josaphat, is now officially recognized and honoured and worshipped throughout the whole of Catholic Christendom as a Christian saint. (Introduction: The Barlaam and Josaphat Literature pages xxxviii-xxxix)

Writing in 1900 Arthur Anthony Macdonnell stated in *A History of Sanskrit Literature*

"Nothing, perhaps, in the history of the migration of Indian tales is more remarkable than the story of Barlaam and Josaphat. At the court of Khalif Almansur (753-774) ... there lived a Christian known as [Saint] John of Damascus, who wrote in Greek the story of Barlaam and Josaphat as a manual of Christian theology. This became one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages, being translated into many oriental as well as European languages... The ... hero ... Prince Josaphat ... being ... Buddha. The name [Josaphat] has been shown to be a corruption of Bodhisattva [a person who is destined for enlightenment] ... Josaphat rose to the rank of saint both in the Greek and the Roman church ... That the founder of an atheistic Oriental religion should have developed into a Christian saint is one of the most astounding facts in religious history." (Chapter XVI Sanskrit Literature and The West pages 419-420)

As explained in the paragraphs above, written by Arthur Anthony Macdonnell and T. W. Rhys Davids, the story of Barlaam and Josaphat was originally believed by many people to have been written by Saint John of Damascus in the eighth century in Greek. However, other research demonstrated that he could not have been the author.

The Catholic Encyclopedia section "Barlaam and Josaphat" explains:

"The Greek text of the legend, written probably by a monk of the Sabbas monastery near Jerusalem at the beginning of the 7th century ... The legend cannot, however, have been a work of the great Damascene [Saint John Damascene], as was proved by Zotenberg ... (Paris, 1886) ... by Hammel (Vienna, 1888) ..."

Wikisource 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica / Barlaam and Josaphat explains

"There are good reasons for thinking that the Christian story did not originate with [Saint] John of Damascus, and a strong case has been made out by Zotenberg that it reflects the religious struggles and disputes of the early seventh century in Syria, and that the Greek text was edited by a monk of Saint Saba named John, his version being the source of all later texts and translations."

In *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch explains that *St. John Damascene: Barlaam and Josaphat*, edited by G. R. Woodward and H. Mattingley, published in 1914, "retains the mistaken attribution to St John of Damascus". For the Georgian version and its transmission, he recommends *The*

Balavariani (Barlaam and Josaphat): A Tale from the Christian East by I.V. Abuladze published in 1966. (page 1037)

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) was a great 20th century Canadian religious scholar who directed the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University from 1964 until 1973. One of his most influential books was *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* published in 1981. In this book Wilfred Cantwell Smith traced the story of Barlaam and Josaphat from a second to fourth century Sanskrit Mahayana Buddhist text, to a Manichee version, to an Arabic Muslim version, to an eleventh century Christian Georgian version, to a Christian Greek version, and from there into Western European languages. He traced Josaphat's name from the Sanskrit term *bodhisattva* via the Middle Persian *bodasif*.

Orthodox Wiki Josaphat explains

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Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare (1856-1924), who taught at Oxford University, also argued that the Georgian version is the earliest Christian version, from which came a Greek, and later a Syriac translation, of which the Armenian is an abridgement. In *The Barlaam and Josaphat Legend in the Ancient Georgian and Armenian Literatures* he stated that

"The first Christianized adaptation was the Georgian epic *Balavariani* dating back to the 10th century. A Georgian monk, Euthymius of Athos, translated the story into Greek, some time before he was killed while visiting Constantinople in 1028. There the Greek adaptation was translated into Latin in 1048 and soon became well known in Western Europe as *Barlaam and Josaphat*."

Writing in *The Times*, Adam Ford explains

"One of the earliest known extant versions is known as *The Life and Acts of the Blessed Iodaspah*, a Georgian manuscript of the eleventh century now in the Greek Patriarchal Library in Jerusalem." ("The Welcome, Gentle Infiltrator", Adam Ford, *The Times* (Saturday 2 June 1984))

Judaism

The story of Barlaam and Josaphat also has a place in Judaism. It was translated into Hebrew in the Middle Ages as *Ben-Hamelekh Vehanazir* or *The Prince and the Nazirite*. Baalam and Josaphat in Jewish Encyclopedia explains

"Baalam and Josaphat [is a] romantic tale ... giving extracts from the life of Buddha and some of his parables in Christian form. ...the Hebrew version of this tale was identified by Steinschneider under the title *Prince and Dervish*, translated and adapted by Abraham Ibn Hasdai, the first edition of which appeared in Constantinople [in] 1518 ... A Yiddish version appeared in Lublin in 1874. The exact origin of Ibn Hasdai's version is difficult to trace ..."

Conclusion

Writing in *The Times*, Adam Ford ends his article by saying of Buddhism and Christianity:

“There are many opportunities for a reconciliation between these two great world religions. Each teaches love, compassion and selflessness. Each bears witness to the reality of the spiritual dimension...” (“The Welcome, Gentle Infiltrator”, Adam Ford, *The Times*, Saturday 2 June 1984)

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